Reviewing the social GRACES: What do they add and limit in systemic thinking and practice?

Abstract

The Social Graces framework developed by Burnham (1992) and Roper-Hall (1998) is increasingly used within training institutions, as a means of encouraging learners to critically explore issues of social difference. Attending to issues of power and diversity is believed to help trainee family therapists become more alert to any biases that may impact on therapy. This review paper draws on the emerging literature to examine what the social graces add and limit in systemic thinking and practice. It also considers an alternative approach for exploring power and difference in family therapy practice.

Keywords: Social graces, intersectionality, systemic practice, trainee therapist.

Introduction

Systemic thinking and practice has progressed since its inception, with the 1980s witnessing a significant shift from first to second order perspectives, whereby systemic practitioners altered their focus from being objective observers to a greater recognition that they, as therapists, cannot be detached from the family system they observe (Smith & Karam, 2018). This second order approach recognized that observers influence that which they are attempting to understand (Becvar & Becvar, 2017). As systemic practice has continued to evolve, the Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice (AFT), which is the leading organization for systemic psychotherapists and practitioners in the UK, has stipulated in its training standards documentation that practitioners need to understand 'how personal background, diversity and difference factors, and culture,

impact on the experience of the systemic therapist' (AFT, 2017, p.13). Meanwhile, its Code of Ethics and Practice document (AFT, 2019) specifies that therapists need to adopt a culturally sensitive stance that does not discriminate against any visible or invisible difference. In order to meet these standards, systemic practitioners need an accessible way to critically explore issues of power and diversity and to reflect on the impact of their own background, positioning and assumptions on the therapeutic process (Smith, 2016). One widely used tool that promotes consideration of social difference has been the Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS framework (referred to herein as social graces), which was jointly developed by John Burnham (1992, 1993) and Alison Roper-Hall (1998).

The social graces framework was established in the UK, at a time when national policy was shaped by 18 years of a Conservative government. This included 11 years with the first female Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, at the helm. Critics argue that Thatcher, nicknamed the 'Iron Lady', left a legacy of economic and moral malaise (Albertson & Stepney, 2020). Although this era witnessed steps forward in the promotion of gender equality (with the Equal Pay Act 1985), disability rights (with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995) and basic rights for all (with the Human Rights Act 1998), 'isms', including sexism, racism and ageism (Burnham, 2012) were very present. This period was punctuated by a challenging economic recession, characterized by high interest rates and increased unemployment, particularly among minority ethnic groups whom encountered direct and indirect discrimination (Anwar, 1991).

During this time, Burnham was working as a systemic therapist, supervisor and trainer, and he recognised that many practitioners struggled with the challenges of working with aspects of social difference, including the aforementioned 'isms' (Burnham, 2012). In order to bring aspects of difference into his, and his trainees' field

of consciousness, he developed a mnemonic called 'DISGRRACCE', to encompass Disability, I, Sexuality, Gender, Race, Religion, Age, Class, Culture and Ethnicity (Burnham, 2012). Burnham incorporated the 'I' to create the mnemonic, but others suggested it could, in fact, represent identity. Although the mnemonic was created with good intention, Burnham recognised that it had negative connotations; he explains how he was asked by a Black female trainee if 'these issues are disgraceful?' (Burnham, 2012, p.140). In response to this, he amended the mnemonic to GRRACCES, thus losing the Disability and I/identity aspect from the earlier iteration. Burnham (2012) explains how Roper-Hall later suggested the inclusion of a 'social' prefix to better represent the socially constructed nature of differences.

Rivett & Street (2009) argue that the graces are preceded by the term 'social' because systemic family therapists are mindful of the impact of social constructs upon individuals. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) purported in his ecological systems theory, psychological development is shaped by the interrelationship of multiple factors within individual, familial, organizational and societal contexts. Thus, attending to, and reflecting on, social graces could enable therapists to be alert to their own preconceptions that may impact on therapy and bring to the fore areas of difference that risk being overlooked.

The social graces have evolved from an initial nine graces to the current 15 areas of social difference (Butler, 2015), which include: Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Sexual orientation and Spirituality (Burnham, 2012). Each grace is continually highlighted as being equally important (Nolte, 2017), which permits a thorough examination of each aspect. The process of separating different aspects of social graces helps facilitate the process of attending to and exploring the particular aspects of social

difference that are most dominant or, conversely, most invisible. Burnham, Alvis Palmer & Whitehouse (2008) suggest that issues of social difference are instrumental in the co-creation of contexts for therapy, as therapists have a propensity to explore issues that they privilege or feel most skilled in focusing on. For instance, one therapist may be more experienced in contemplating issues of sexism or spirituality than race, for example, but exploring the latter in supervision may help orient the therapist to the client's lived experience and, subsequently, promote understanding of the social context of diverse families. It is clear that within the second order perspective, attending to issues of power and difference is essential, but what, specifically do the social graces add to systemic thinking and practice?

The appeal of the Social Graces framework

Burnham (1992, 1993) and Roper-Hall (1998) sought to promote curiosity in considering issues of power, oppression and connection (Butler, 2015). According to Nolte (2017), the graces framework achieves this by offering 'a helpful way for us to become intentional in our developing awareness of, reflexivity about, and skilfulness in, responding to sameness and difference' (p.4). This is a critical skill for family therapists, who are not immune to unconscious bias. For example, FitzGerald & Hurst's (2017) systematic review on implicit bias found no differences in the bias exhibited by healthcare workers and the wider population. FitzGerald & Hurst surmise that action needs to be taken in order to mitigate unconscious racial, gender, sexual minority, and disability bias, particularly within training programs. This critical period is when clinicians are developing skills that adhere to ethical codes of conduct, such as not discriminating against any in/visible difference (AFT, 2019). Whilst family therapists' understanding of

inter-group prejudice and bias might be informed by other academic works, for example Tajfel & Turner's (1979) theory of social identity, the graces framework offers an accessible means of bringing to the fore less visible and unvoiced aspects of identity that might not have been easily articulated, and where unconscious bias might exist.

The social graces acronym offers a prompt, particularly when exploring which of the graces grab the therapist the most and which of the graces the therapist least comprehends (Totsuka, 2014), thus prompting reflection (Smith, 2016) about why the therapist is drawn to particular aspects of the graces over others. However, critics may argue that focusing on distinctive facets of identity, such as race and gender, risks the production of dichotomous or hierarchical thinking (Chantler, 2005; Butler, 2015). According to Jones & Reeve (2014), the graces framework offers a useful scaffold and mnemonic for aspects of difference, which may help those starting out on their systemic training journey to understand how one's assumptions, background and position impact on therapy (Smith, 2016). It also enables aspects of identity to be contemplated in depth, while also considering power, lived experience, and skill development (Butler, 2015). Thus, promoting self-reflexivity on those aspects of difference (Totsuka, 2014), which is an integral aspect in the development of systemic thinking and practice.

Using the social graces framework in clinical practice and training

Reflecting on their teaching experiences at the Tavistock Institute in London, Partridge & McCarry (2017) observed that trainees often worry about saying the wrong thing or causing offense when working with constructions of otherness that are often imbued in

childhood. Yet, they stress the importance of helping trainee therapists to develop greater self-reflexivity and recognize issues of difference. Partridge & McCarry also recognize that exploring the graces with students is not always comfortable for those teaching and supervising students. For example, during one training session, Partridge shared a previously unvoiced childhood memory of her grandmother making a racist remark that left her 'feeling contorted inside by the awful wrongness of her statement' (p.8). Partridge noticed that the group were shocked and silenced, which left her feeling silenced and ashamed anew. For trainees and qualified therapists alike, shame can maintain the status quo by silencing dissent, but Partridge & McCarry (2017) argue that social graces can help link to action at a socio-political level, suggesting that therapists dance between discourses to enabling positions. Although Partridge described the aforementioned encounter as a painful learning experience, she recognized that it provided a means to engage students with the topic of difference. Moreover, it drew attention to how institutional and societal structures shape oppressive discourses. During subsequent class discussions, trainees were encouraged to scrutinize newspapers for negative stereotypes about minority groups. Partridge & McCarry (2017) recognize that as a result of Partridge modelling transparency and sharing her family experience of otherness, trainees were ultimately and collectively given permission to dismantle oppressive attitudes and scrutinize negative stereotypes that exist within society. Consequently, Partridge & McCarry report that shame was dissolved, and students enthusiastically engaged with the topic.

The social graces framework has also been utilized by Divac & Heaphy (2005) to facilitate cultural competence among trainee supervisors enrolled on a postgraduate program in systemic practice in the north of England. In pursuit of a curriculum that promotes critical reflection of issues of power and difference, Divac & Heaphy

developed a model called 'Space for GRRAACCES[1]' to help trainees identify their position in dominant or marginalized groups, depending upon the context they are in. The key features of the model are: (i) Attending to process and experience rather than content, whereby trainees explore attitudes about their own cultures and interactions between cultures to develop greater cultural knowledge by learning from one another; (ii) Examining multiplexity (Akamatsu, 1998) in a group context, which involves reflection on the contexts in which individuals are privileged and disadvantaged according to particular aspects of identity such as gender, race, age etc. [Divac & Heaphy believe this helps trainees to recognize dynamics of power and emotionally understand the shifting positions people occupy]; and (iii) recording sessions to promote further reflection. Divac & Heaphy employ this model in a designated session in the program that focuses on the development of reflective skills regarding cross-cultural practice, whereby trainees explore their own culturally determined attitudes, values and beliefs. They describe an example activity, called the 'Lines of privilege' exercise, which comprises an imaginary line with 'most privileged' at one end and 'least privileged' at the other. Divac & Heaphy (2005) explain that this requires trainees to go to the end of the line according to one aspect of the GRRAACES and are then speak from that position, reflecting on what it is like to be inhabit that position, before changing positions and comparing the different experiences. Divac & Heaphy hope that their space for graces model enables trainees to better understand 'the processes by which some voices become dominant and privileged and others silenced and subjugated, through the exploration of personal experiences' (p.283). Partridge (2019) acknowledges that trainees will have diverse experiences of privilege and

[1] At the time of writing, GRRAACCES comprised Gender, Race, Religion, Age, Abilities, Culture, Class, Ethnicity and Sexual Orientation.

powerlessness, and therefore advises program staff to ‘warm the context’ (Burnham, 2005) and establish ground rules before discussing experiences of power, powerlessness and the social graces.

In addition, the social graces framework has utility in exploring how social differences develop and shape trainees’ learning experiences. Burnham et al. (2008) exemplify this in their account exploring social graces within a small group of systemic psychotherapists in the third year of a four-year training program in England. Burnham et al. deconstructed the differences between the training group during a video review of clinical work with a reflecting team. Burnham et al. explain that the group comprised three white British female trainees, a mixed-race Latin American female supervisor-in-training, and a white British male supervisor. There were visible and voiced differences among the group (including gender, ethnicity, age and ability), while aspects such as sexuality, class, religion and education were invisible and voiced. Reflecting afterwards on the visible and unvoiced aspects of social graces, one trainee identified that education and experience were at the forefront of the learning experience for her, viewing the supervisors as experienced in contrast to her feeling inexperienced. Burnham et al. (2008) explain that following the reflective discussion about social graces, one trainee suggested a new grace: size or physical presence, noting that her difficult past experiences of being small contrasted with the male supervisor’s tall stature and physical presence. Smith (2016) concurs that the existing social graces should be extended to include anatomical features, asserting that there are associations between physical presentation and behavioural responses. Meanwhile, Burnham et al. (2008), report that the supervisor-in-training reflected that stories of experience impacted on her

(dis)ability to position as supervisor when in the male supervisor's presence. Prior to the clinical review activity, she identified most with the trainees and observed more differences with the supervisor but then reflected afterwards that her position had shifted, and she observed more similarities with him and greater differences with the trainees. Burnham et al. suggest that increased self-reflexivity and relational reflexivity can help promote collaboration in contexts where traditional hierarchical relationships exist, such as formal training environments.

These examples suggest that the social graces framework has utility in training contexts, with advocates of the framework perceiving it as a 'recognizable, clear, adaptable and graceful tool' (Nolte, 2017, p.4) that promotes awareness of wider cultural practices and discourses (Dallos & Draper, 2015). It is, however, not without its limitations, which need to be recognized.

Identifying limitations

The primary limitation of the social graces is its restrictive linear nature. For example, it could be criticized for failing to embrace the complexity of people's lives (Burnham et al., 2008), which are far from linear. However, Burnham (2012) suggests that linear separation affords each aspect of social difference attention that it might not otherwise receive**.** Burnham also argues that the social graces are more than a linear list, and, instead, should be considered more like a kaleidoscope, or 'collide-scope', with the capacity to zoom focus onto multiple aspects of social difference, bringing them into the foreground in different contexts and at different times (Totsuka, 2014). Burnham (2012) intended the collide-scope to engender curiosity and increase therapists' awareness of their relative position in relation to social difference for them and the positioning of

clients. Burnham et al. (2008) explain that the constituent parts of the social graces wax and wane over time, depending on what is permissible to discuss in any therapeutic relationship. However, aspects of social difference remain distinct. Although Nolte (2017) argues that each grace is equally important, therapists may privilege some graces more than others, depending on which of the graces fall within the therapist's comfort zone. Partridge & McCarry (2017) warn that staying within a privileged comfort zone can blunt the therapist's systemic edge and reduce the likelihood of therapists expanding their therapeutic repertoire (Wilson, 2007) . The ability to resist privileging some graces over others will, however, depend on the level of therapists' skill and comfort (Totsuka, 2014) in reflectively considering whether graces are (in)visible (i.e. visually present or not) and (un)voiced (i.e. named and discussed or not) (Burnham, 2012).

Social graces are also critiqued for being reductive. As Nolte (2017) denotes, social graces risk being reduced to 'a list of areas of difference' (p.4), particularly if practitioners fail to attend to the values that underpin the graces. For example, Nolte asserts that social graces should be considered in the context of power and privilege (which includes political discourse), diversity and social inclusion (including therapists' commitment to this), with therapists' enacting ethics rather than merely talking about them. Krause's (2012) concept of comprehensive reflexivity offers a useful means of embracing 'recursiveness between different aspects of meaning, interpretation and experience' (p.8) held by therapists or clients, which Reynolds (2020) suggests can be used to comprehend power constructions and the relationship between oppressive institutional practices and the individuals constrained by them. Nolte (2017) further argues that the three P's (i.e. politics, personal connection and participation) foster a

culture where values are brought to the foreground and these should be considered when appraising social graces.

A further limitation of the current 15 social graces is its failure in not attending to disablism, which Burnham previously recognised in his DISGRACE mnemonic but dropped as the social graces evolved. Jones & Reeve (2014) argue that the ability aspect of the graces should be retained but they advocate for the inclusion of disability/disablism and impairment, which they believe would facilitate curiosity about structural and psycho-emotional disablism, and, further, would invite curiosity about the lived experience and the psycho-emotional impact of impairment. Jones and Reeve suggest that this would incorporate both physical impairment (e.g. fatigue and pain) and impairment linked to mental health, including depression and anxiety, which is common among people with physical and learning disabilities (Barnet et al., 2012; NICE, 2020). Although disablism and impairment are not included in the current iteration of the social graces, the authors of this paper observed it was a prominent theme when discussing issues of social difference during clinical supervision about a client, who was given the pseudonym 'Polly'. Polly had a mild learning disability and was experiencing low mood and difficulties in managing frustration and anger. Although it was initially invisible and unvoiced, it became apparent that the trainee therapist and Polly had vastly different experiences of agency when dealing with professionals. Whilst the trainee had experience of being treated as an equal, perhaps because of her ability and education, Polly had a long history of professionals making decisions on her behalf, most of which she disagreed with, which left her feeling frustrated and powerless. As a result of discussing disablism and impairment in supervision, the therapist increased her curiosity and awareness of how professionals operated within the context of structural (dis)ablism and, consequently, Polly's need for autonomy and agency became voiced as she found a

way to communicate her needs to other professionals and family members. Consequently, Polly's self-reported frustration and anger decreased, and she reported improved mood when she felt family and professionals were listening to her. In this case, disablism was brought into the foreground (Totsuka, 2014) to recognize how the client's thinking and behaviour had been shaped by her past experience of powerlessness.

Smith (2016) identifies further gaps in the existing graces and argues that they should be extended to include anatomical differences (as previously mentioned) and language, namely because communication differentiates and illuminates social group membership. For example, written communication may reflect wealth, social class and rudimentary markers of intelligence (Smith, 2016). Given the evolving nature of the social graces to date (i.e. in increasing from nine to 15 graces), there may be scope for these to be added in future.

Alternative approach for exploring power and difference in systemic practice

Although social graces can help therapists attend to aspects of power and social difference that may be (un)voiced or (in)visible (Burnham, 2012), focusing on discrete aspects of identity forfeits the uniqueness and complexities of the privileges and oppressions created at intersections of therapists' and clients' social locations (Butler, 2015). The concept of intersectionality, meanwhile, meets this gap, as it permits a '*both and'* position. The term intersectionality was propagated by Crenshaw (1989), who differentiated between structural, political and representational intersectionality in her research about the marginalization and the oppression of female Black employees (Hopkins, 2017). Crenshaw argued that many women's experiences were not explained within the traditional, discrete boundaries of gender *or* race discrimination, and could

only be explained by considering the intersectional experience of sexism *and* racism (Crenshaw, 1994), which Crenshaw (1989) clarified was greater than the sum of its parts.

Intersectionality is illustrated in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, which has gained momentum since it was founded by three Black women in 2013, two of whom identify as queer (Tillery, 2019; Spencer & Androne, 2019). Furman, Singh, Darko & Wilson (2018) write about issues of tension that have been witnessed between BLM and LGBTQ communities in Toronto but draw attention to structural oppression that maintains the marginalization of minority groups and the rhetoric that has attempted to separate blackness from queerness and transness. As Sewell (2018) denotes, 'Black queer, feminist, and intersectional thought is not a mere thread of BLM; it is the *central* thread of #BlackLivesMatter and its intellectual lineage' (p.1444).

The interwoven nature of social graces means that it can be difficult to unpick certain graces; for example, religion, culture and ethnicity may be closely interwoven and not be easily separated (Totsuka, 2014). Similarly, Jefferson, Neilands & Savelius (2014) recognize that trans women of colour encounter multiple marginalisation's, making it difficult to separate aspects of gender and race oppression that occur simultaneously (Timothy, 2019). Thus, aspects of social difference 'operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities' (Collins, 2015, p.1).

As intersectionality focuses on 'mutually constitutive forms of social oppression rather than a single axis of difference' (Hopkins, 2017, p.937), it could be argued that it offers more than social graces alone and is a good conceptual fit for systemic therapy, which embraces the complexity of human behaviour. However, as Butler (2015) identifies, the concept of intersectionality remains comparatively under-used by

systemic family therapists. Akin to social graces, intersectionality is not without criticism. For example, intersectionality discourse often refers to the interlocking forms of oppression, but, as Hopkins (2017) identifies, it is not always clear what this means. Moreover, intersectionality commonly focuses on oppression but can be used to assess other subject positions, including privilege, which is sometimes overlooked.

Implications for family therapy practice

This paper highlights the need for therapists to become more cognizant of the way in which diversity, culture and difference impact on both the experience of the family therapist (AFT, 2017) and clients, to ensure that individuals are not discriminated against as a result of in/visible differences (AFT, 2019). The social graces framework can help family therapists ameliorate social inclusion by becoming more intentional in developing knowledge and skills that respond to diversity by recognizing issues of sameness and the positioning of otherness. One can, however, fall into the trap of privileging the aspects of social difference that feel most comfortable to attend to, particularly as a trainee therapist, so the graces framework could be used to raise awareness of less obvious (invisible or unvoiced) issues that may be instrumental in the co-creation of context for therapy (Burnham et al., 2008). When introduced to the social graces framework, it can be tempting to focus one's gaze on the 15 graces listed (Burnham, 2012), but therapists would benefit from thinking critically about aspects of difference that have not yet been incorporated, including those listed in this paper (including language, disability and impairment) or other characteristics that have not yet been identified. Roper-Hall (1998) advocates using a mind map to facilitate the generation and inclusion of other aspects of experience (Burnham, 2012). To avoid the

pitfall of exploring the social graces framework in a linear and reductive fashion, it would be advantageous for family therapists to consider the graces in the context of power and privilege (Nolte, 2017) in order to better understand client perspectives that impact on the therapeutic dance. In an epoch of political divisiveness in the UK (following Brexit) and the positioning of otherness within divisive rhetoric in the US, it would be valuable to reflect on the structural oppression that further marginalizes particular groups of individuals. Asking which graces are most difficult to comprehend can help family therapists better understand the uniqueness of otherness and also attend to graces that could become subjugated in practice (Burnham et al., 2008). This may be useful for trainee therapists embarking on their career in this field. For example, self-reflection alongside discussion during supervision could help bring to the fore aspects of clients' lives that may be invisible and unvoiced. Meanwhile, asking which graces most grab therapists (Totsuka, 2014) can facilitate reflection on elements of clients' lives that have a prevailing presence. However, in order to fully comprehend the complexity of human behaviour within the therapy room, therapists would benefit from developing skills in adopting the '*both and'* position permitted by the concept of intersectionality; but, to date, there is limited literature addressing therapists' understanding of intersectionality.

Direction for future research

Future research into therapists' awareness of diversity could be enhanced by attending to clinicians' use of the social graces framework in family therapy practice. Despite its popular use as a framework for those training in systemic family therapy in the UK, more research is needed to explore practitioners' application of the social graces framework in practice. Even less is known about how this impacts on clinical practice.

As the social graces appear to continually evolve, it would be helpful for future research to identify other aspects of social difference that could be incorporated in future iterations of the graces; for example, language, anatomy, disability and impairment. Burnham (2012) acknowledges that no framework is ever complete and is open to others adding to the graces; it would therefore be helpful to draw on research that incorporates the expertise of practitioners to identify existing gaps. It would also be prudent to investigate barriers to clinicians' development of awareness of otherness. Furthermore, there is a need for research that identifies ways of supporting trainee family therapists in developing greater insight and understanding of intersectionality. Future research should focus on the visible, invisible, voiced and unvoiced aspects of family therapy and supervision, and address the concept of intersectionality, which remains comparatively under-used by systemic family therapists.

Conclusion

To conclude, the social graces may provide therapists with a scaffold for considering power, diversity and social difference in systemic thinking and practice. The literature suggests that the social graces framework has been used to promote curiosity to help trainee therapists to become more intentional, reflexive and skilled in responding to sameness and difference, and to gain insight into areas that become subjugated in practice. Although the social graces have been critiqued for being linear, reductive and for failing to attend fully to aspects of language, disability and impairment, if used flexibly an adapted version of the graces could be used by practitioners to meet their own and their clients' needs, thus adhering to AFT ethical codes. In order to remain curious about clients' lived experiences, graces could perhaps be considered in

conjunction with the concept of intersectionality, which permits insight into the complexity of both oppression and privilege, which may potentially be missed if attending to the social graces alone.

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